CURRICULAR COLLABORATION, PROGRAMMATIC COLLISION: CHALLENGES TO INTEGRATING TUTOR TRAINING FOR WRITING CENTERS AND WRITING FELLOWS PROGRAMS

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Introduction

For years our Writing Center and our Writing Fellows program, a curricular-based, undergraduate peer tutoring program, had operated autonomously to the point of cordial estrangement. Then a series of widespread changes in leadership and institutional structure prompted us to ask, "How can we bring these programs closer together?" Training became the focal point of our discussions. At the time, tutors were trained through a credit-bearing internship; fellows were trained through a credit-bearing course. Notable overlap in peer tutoring theories and methods prompted the question, "What if we integrated training for tutors and fellows?" We sensed the complexity of the task but were eager to experiment. We believed that collaborating would produce an innovative curriculum that would improve the quality of tutoring and strengthen connections between programs. After all, we presumed, wouldn't only good things come from collaborating?

In this article, I describe and reflect on the development and demise of our effort to create an integrated training course for tutors and fellows to illustrate the complexities of administrative collaboration. While several factors constrained the success of our integrated course, I argue that the underlying problem was an inadequate conception of administrative collaboration, one that overlooked the integral relationship between programmatic structure and curricular practices and the corresponding need to coordinate curricular and administrative revision. I first situate the development of our integrated course within existing literature on writing centers and institutional relationships to demonstrate a lack of current models for guiding administrative collaboration, especially between similar but separate writing tutoring programs. I then describe the conditions contributing to the course's proposal and development and highlight complications that emerged early in its implementation to demonstrate the impact of programmatic pressures on curricular structure. I conclude by briefly outlining a modified version of the course that attempts to better balance curricular revision with programmatic needs. This account underscores the complexities of administrative collaboration between similar but separate writing tutoring programs, and it encourages professionals in writing centers and related fields to approach curricular collaborations with writing support programs critically and carefully.

Arguably *the* foundational concept in writing center work, collaboration is variously cast as a theory, a method, a goal, and an outcome; consequently, it is frequently considered a presumed good, a taken-for-granted assumption in writing center scholarship. In their assessment of classroom-based writing tutoring, Spigelman and Grobman invoke collaboration when describing the benefits of this instructional approach: students benefit from "collaborative models" of teaching and learning and from experiencing writing as a collaborative and social act; teachers benefit from classroom-based collaborations with tutors through increased familiarity with theories and practices that support effective writing instruction; tutors benefit from the professionalizing experiences of collaborating with teachers and assuming expanded roles in classrooms; and writing centers benefit from conversations and partnerships prompted by collaborating with "institutional structures and programs" (6-10). But, as Muriel Harris reminds us, the ubiquity of collaboration can lead to indiscriminate use of the term that "blur[s] useful distinctions" among programs or activities with similar approaches and methods but with different "underlying perspectives, assumptions, and goals" (369). Harris's observation applies to professionals seeking to engage in collaboration across tutoring programs, especially those with similarities in methods *and* goals. Melissa Nicolas experienced this while administering a Peer Writing Consultant Program, which used consultants-in-training to facilitate peer response groups in basic writing courses. Initially supportive, Nicolas became concerned about the program's effectiveness after identifying two problems: first, the program's "conflation of two related collaborative learning models: peer response and tutoring"; and second, its

"uncritical collapsing of the boundaries between curriculum-based tutoring and writing center tutoring" (113). After reviewing some unintended consequences of the program, Nicolas argues that administrators seeking to "create new models of collaboration" must train students explicitly to recognize "how different models of collaboration can and should work" (121).

I would modify and extend Nicolas's invitation by saying that program directors and professionals seeking to increase collaboration between writing support programs must imagine new models of administrative collaboration and recognize how collaborations that focus on teaching or training create corresponding needs for programmatic revision and administrative adaptation. Because administrative collaborations rival curricular collaborations in their complexity, administrators need to develop clear, perhaps even discrete, models to inform their work in both areas. As a novice writing center director, I presumed that a collaborative approach would be as essential to my administrative work as it had been to my tutoring practice. This is why I readily embraced the opportunity to pursue a curricular collaboration with our Writing Fellows program. But I overlooked, first, how administrative contexts require different conceptions of and approaches to collaboration and, second, the complexities of developing a collaborative partnership between tutoring programs with similarities in goals, methods, theories and practices.

The integral relationship between a tutoring program and its curriculum is particularly evident when collaborative curricular innovations are not accompanied by programmatic changes that will sustain those innovations. This may sound obvious, but I believe my colleagues and I failed to appreciate this relationship in our effort to develop a single training course for separate writing tutoring programs. Unfortunately, our engagement in curricular collaboration underestimated how the separate needs of both programs would create competing constraints for tutor training that inhibited substantial and sustainable curricular revision. Consequently, the site which we anticipated would initiate programmatic collaboration—the integrated training course—actually instigated programmatic collision, leading us to discontinue the integrated course and revert to our previous, separate training models.

Admittedly, several factors contributed to the demise of our curricular experiment, including my lack of administrative experience and limited awareness of the complexities of administrative collaboration. But an equally significant factor was the tendency of existing scholarship to reinforce collaboration as a presumed good in writing center administration.

Limitations of Existing Scholarship

Recent scholarship on writing centers and institutional relationships signals a clear invitation to pursue engagement, collaborations, and partnerships with programs and people across and even beyond one's institution (Mauriello, Macauley, Jr., and Koch, Jr. 3). The few essays in collections such as *Before and After the Tutorial: Writing Centers and Institutional Relationships* and *Marginal Words, Marginal Work? Tutoring the Academy in the Work of Writing Centers* that address the challenges and risks of collaboration reinforce its value; none call into question or advocate avoiding the practice. Thus, program directors who consult such literature may gloss over the full implications of the complexities of writing-center based administrative collaborations, assuming that a collaborative approach will ultimately result in beneficial outcomes.

A more specific limitation of much of this scholarship is its emphasis on collaborations with programs or people largely unfamiliar with writing centers, which diminishes its relevance for those seeking to develop collaborative relationships among similar tutoring programs. Even Linda Bergmann and Tammy Conard-Salvo's application of collaborative learning principles to inform administrative efforts in pursuing stronger relationships between programs that support writing, which they demonstrate through their effort to bring administrators of the writing center and first-year composition and their programs into closer contact, illustrates this tendency to discuss collaborations between writing centers and other programs with clearly different identities, roles, and expertise. In such partnerships, the writing center is granted or tasked with legitimizing its authority on knowledge and practices of writing, peer tutoring, and—especially—collaboration. But these distinctions are blurred when writing centers pursue collaborations with similar tutoring programs that have equal claim to such knowledge and practices. As Nicolas argues, such blurring can produce innovative curricular collaborations that excite administrators but confuse tutors and students and diminish the effectiveness of the innovation. Having access to scholarship that documents the complexities of writing-center based administrative collaboration could help writing center professionals avoid or address such problems.

A related limitation in existing scholarship is the tendency to concentrate on the instructional dimensions or implications of collaboration, often at the expense of larger programmatic and administrative dimensions. Although Maggie Herb and Virginia

Perdue note the absence of scholarship on writing center outreach to non-academic areas, in addressing this gap the authors focus on how collaborating with their campus's counseling center improved tutor training. This example illustrates how tutor training as a collaborative teaching and learning activity tends to be closely associated, if not conflated, with the practice of pursuing collaborative partnerships, creating the perception that the latter primarily serves the former. Such conflation can inadvertently perpetuate the assumption, reflected in our effort to integrate training for tutors and fellows, that collaborating on curricular development is a natural and appropriate location to initiate programmatic collaboration. But our experience suggests that this is not necessarily the case.

A final limitation of current scholarship is a lack of models to guide collaborations between writing centers and writing fellows in ways that respect the autonomy of both programs. Carol Severino and Megan Knight characterize the University of Iowa (IU) Writing Fellows program as serving an "ambassadorial function" for the campus's Writing Center (21). At IU, the two programs operate harmoniously because of a precedent of partnerships between the Writing Center and the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program; but at our institution, where the Writing Center, the Writing Fellows program, and Writing Across the Curriculum emerged at different times under different administrators and have operated in relative autonomy, if not isolation, the ambassador analogy would be misconstrued as an attempt to subordinate the Fellows program to the Writing Center. Even when the Writing Center and Writing Fellows program "are branches of the same agency, run by the same people," the administrative complexities of such an arrangement have prompted some to acknowledge the virtues of having both programs operate independently (Leahy 71).

Although we found limited guidance in the scholarship, we forged ahead to develop an integrated tutor training course, exercising faith in the promise of collaboration and our collective wisdom and experience to design an innovative training course.

Institutional Context and Conditions for Change

Some institutional context helps explain the circumstances prompting our curricular collaboration. The BYU Writing Center, a university-wide generalist tutoring service created in the 1970s, employs approximately thirty undergraduate tutors per semester, with reduced staff during summer months. The BYU Writing Fellows, a curricular-based peer tutoring program created in the early 1990s, employs approximately sixty undergraduate fellows per semester who work with undergraduate students in specific courses in the disciplines. In past decades, program administrators would occasionally collaborate to host a local peer tutoring conference, and an occasional writing tutor would also work as a writing fellow or vice versa. But, in general, both programs operated largely in isolation.

Recent institutional changes brought the Writing Fellows program, previously housed in the General Education/Honors department, under the administration of University Writing (formerly English Composition) which, housed in the English department, is responsible for first-year and advanced writing, Writing Across the Curriculum, and the Writing Center. More recently, during the 2012-2013 academic year, a series of widespread leadership and administrative changes in University Writing and the English department prompted talk of increasing collaboration between the Writing Center and Writing Fellows programs: the conversion of the Writing Center coordinator position from a professional to a professorial track; the creation of a Writing Center assistant coordinator position; the hiring of a new Writing Center coordinator, Writing Center assistant coordinator, Writing Fellows coordinator, and WAC coordinator. In addition, the University Writing coordinator and the English department chair, who oversees University Writing, began their terms in their respective positions. A kairotic sense of energy accompanied such widespread leadership change, motivating several individuals to begin discussing ways to pursue programmatic improvements and collaborations.

In early 2013, the outgoing WAC coordinator, incoming WAC coordinator, who was the outgoing Writing Fellows coordinator, and incoming Writing Center coordinator (me) began meeting to discuss ways to strengthen connections between the Writing Center and Writing Fellows programs. The outgoing WAC coordinator, who had also previously served as Writing Fellows coordinator, suggested that cross-training tutors and fellows might be a sensible first step. At the time, initial training for tutors and fellows occurred separately. The Writing Center used an academic internship model: prospective tutors were interviewed, and successful applicants were invited to enroll in a credit-bearing internship on peer tutoring. Interns would be assigned shifts in the Writing Center and observe, team-tutor, and meet with the program coordinator and other interns to discuss readings, observations, and writing assignments. Successful interns were usually hired as paid tutors the following

semester. Writing Fellows used a course-based model: prospective fellows were interviewed, and successful applicants were hired as fellows and required to register for a credit-bearing course in peer tutoring that also satisfied the university's general education advanced writing requirement. The course introduced students to peer tutoring theory and methods and required writing and research assignments related to writing or tutoring writing. After approximately four weeks in the course, students would begin fellowing.

Proposed Curricular Change: A General Peer Writing Tutor Training Course

The clear overlap in peer tutoring theories and practices covered by both training models suggested that training would be a natural site of collaboration. Hence, our discussions about collaborating soon focused on imagining a general writing tutor training course that would prepare any student to work in either program, or both. Soon, a proposal was submitted to the department chair to dissolve the Writing Center internship and redesign the existing Writing Fellows course as a general peer writing tutor training course. The course would retain its emphasis on peer tutoring, but course content and assignments would be modified to accommodate the training needs of fellows and tutors. The writing instruction would be reframed as an introduction to writing studies, encouraging students to situate their writing, research, and tutoring in this broader discipline. The outgoing Writing Fellows coordinator and incoming Writing Center director (me) would share responsibility for redesigning and co-teaching the course during the 2013-2014 academic year, after which the incoming Writing Fellows director and I would alternate semesters as course instructors. In highlighting intended outcomes of the course, the proposal reflected our faith in the benefits of this collaboration: it would create synergy between the two programs; produce a more robust and consistent training experience; provide a more fluid and versatile staff able and motivated to move between programs; create a precedent for pursuing additional collaborations between the programs.

Following the proposal's approval, the outgoing Writing Fellows coordinator and I began meeting regularly to design this integrated tutor training course. We made substantial revisions to course scope and content: expanded and clarified learning outcomes, increased the reading assignments on peer tutoring, revised and resituated the research-based writing assignments within a writing studies framework, modified existing and added new writing assignments, and increased the number of observations students conducted in the Writing Center. These content revisions broadened the emphasis of the course, but they were not accompanied by changes to the course's original structure. In fact, the course could not accommodate substantial structural revision because its structure was integral to the maintenance of the program it was originally created to support: Writing Fellows. Our failure to recognize the integral relationship between a program and its curriculum, and specifically how programmatic needs shape both the content and the structure of a curriculum, reflects the tendency in current scholarship, noted earlier, to conceptualize programmatic collaboration primarily in terms of curriculum or instruction while neglecting the programmatic and administrative dimensions and implications of such collaborations.

Because we became aware of this programmatic constraint on curricular revision after our proposal had been approved, we were obligated to proceed with implementing the integrated training course, despite our emerging reservations. Programmatic collision ensued. This was especially apparent in two instances: determining staffing needs and implementing a recruiting plan for both programs.

Programmatic Constraints on Curricular Structure: Staffing and Recruiting

Discrepancies in staffing needs for both programs was the most visible programmatic pressure that prevented substantial restructuring of the course. Typically, each semester the Writing Center trains between four and eight interns, while the Writing Fellows program trains between 20-25. The discrepancy, coupled with a diminished Writing Fellows staff and low enrollment in the training course for the Fall 2013 semester, suggested that staffing needs were more immediate for the Writing Fellows program than for the Writing Center. Consequently, while all students who enrolled in the course would be trained to work in both programs, they would be required to work concurrently as fellows; in short, they would fellow first and tutor second. To compensate for this imbalance, the full staff of the Writing Fellows—the 40-50 experienced fellows in addition to those in the course—would be included in the applicant pool for Writing Center employment. Further, it was proposed that a handful of students in the training course could be groomed for employment in the Writing Center, although they would not be able to work until the following semester. But both program coordinators were concerned about problematic constraints on hiring and staffing likely to

emerge from this approach to joint-training and joint-staffing.

Programmatic needs also affected recruiting students to become tutors or fellows. Given our preoccupation with revising course content, we did not develop a joint-recruitment plan until after the Writing Fellows advertising and recruiting campaign had been launched by the new program coordinator, who was aware of but not involved in the curricular changes. Previously, writing fellows staff would conduct an intensive two-week recruiting campaign across campus at mid-semester, then interview and hire selected applicants who would enroll in the next semester's Writing Fellows training course. In contrast, the Writing Center coordinator would contact instructors from English and writing-intensive courses toward the end of the semester, invite them to encourage strong writers to apply for the Writing Center internship, and then interview and invite selected applicants to enroll in the next semester's internship. To integrate recruiting efforts, we imagined that tutors and fellows would work together to invite students to work as peer tutors in either program.

However, programmatic needs again trumped our effort at collaboration: we were unable to create a viable marketing campaign to recruit students to enroll in a general writing tutor training course because the ultimate goal of recruiting was to invite students to work in a specific program, not to take a course or to become a general writing tutor. And course structure further constrained employment choices for students interested in the Writing Center by requiring them to first work in the Writing Fellows program. In its modified form, then, joint-recruiting involved mostly writing fellows and some writing tutors recruiting students to become writing fellows with the possibility of being considered for employment in the Writing Center. To offset this imbalance, it was assumed that, given the stability of writing center work as a part-time job in contrast to the seasonal work of the writing fellows, a substantial number of writing fellows would regularly be interested in pursuing Writing Center employment.

Considering Alternatives

This brief description of our year-long experiment to design an integrated training course for writing fellows and writing center tutors does not adequately represent the complexities of the collaboration, the commitment and earnest effort all participants brought to the effort, or the benefits that continue to emerge from it, including increased communication between the current program coordinators and aspirations of pursuing future collaborations. What I hope to have illustrated is the complexities involved in collaborations between similar but separate peer tutoring programs, which stem from the intricate and often overlooked relationship between a program's administrative needs and the content and structure of its curriculum. And while this may be an obvious realization, I suggest that it is obscured by the dominant perception of the inherent goodness of collaboration in writing center scholarship. I also hope that this account will promote a more deliberative approach to collaboration for writing center professionals seeking to develop partnerships with course-embedded writing support programs, one that echoes Nicolas's caution against "uncritically collapsing the boundaries" between tutoring programs and their accompanying administrative structures.

Reflecting on possible alternatives to the integrated tutor training course described above, I imagine a fully restructured course, a genuine hybrid of the Writing Center internship and the Writing Fellows course that draws on the strengths of the curricular revisions in our integrated course. Such a course could consist of three parts: a) an introduction to collaborative learning theory, the field of writing studies, and peer tutoring strategies; b) an internship-like experience, where students work for a substantial portion of the course as writing fellows or writing center interns and are given ample opportunities to apply, reflect on, write about, assess, and even conduct research on the foundational theories and practices they've been learning and using; and c) a concluding portion that brings students together to share and compare their respective tutoring and fellowing experiences. Perhaps the culminating assignment could be a collaborative portfolio, produced by pairs of students who reflect on and incorporate their separate tutoring and fellowing experiences to showcase similarities and differences of both practices and the accompanying similarities and differences of the programs that support those practices. But while such a restructured course is likely to provide an integrated training experience for students, its creation must be accompanied by an administrative structure that would balance the needs of participating programs.

To minimize programmatic collision when engaging in curricular collaboration, administrators ought to consider such questions as,

- What does successful administrative collaboration look like among similar but separate tutoring programs?

- Can an integrated training course meet the needs of tutoring programs with separate administrative structures?
- What models of administrative collaboration can mitigate programmatic constraints on innovative curricular collaborations?

As professionals from writing centers, curriculum-based peer tutoring programs, and related programs address these questions and forge partnerships in a spirit of deliberate collaboration, I'm optimistic that we can find promising answers and models for curricular revisions and programmatic collaborations that build on rather than blur boundaries that are worth preserving.

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